



A Sustained Solitude : On building community

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A Sustained Solitude:

On building community

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This paper explores the personal challenges of ethnographic fieldwork and the insight these challenges provide on how to live a sustainable and fulfilled human life. It is written as a meditation on fieldwork conducted in Berlin, Germany as part of my PhD project. This fieldwork focuses on understanding the democratisation processes of cities that have undergone significant societal conflict and division. In this research, I take methodological approaches from the anthropological tradition (such as qualitative interview and participant observation) to examine archives and memorials documenting experiences of incarceration. Placing the ethnographic lens on myself in this piece allows me to explore both my impetus for conducting this type of research and what I have learned from the personal challenges of doing so. Rather than focusing on the purely academic, I chose to write this piece as a personal narrative to describe my inclination for wandering and why I think this inclination is important to examine in the context of my current research. These ideas are connected to wider ideas around sustainability through an examination of the importance of building and fostering meaningful human connections and community during these uncertain times.

Keywords: ethnographic fieldwork, sustainable, Berlin, personal narrative

Once, in Dublin, I met a man that insisted on calling me Penelope. He acknowledged his awareness at this not being my name. However, this did not impede him gesturing toward me for the rest of the night with emphatic bouts of 'Penelope!' He mistakenly thought my friend and I were a couple - a mistake we chose not to correct. If he intentionally called me by the wrong name, then what use would it be providing him such inconsequential details as the truth? As usually happens early in any conversation I have abroad, it came out that I am American. As my friend and I left the bar, this man sidled over to me and said, "Hey, do you think you'll stay in Ireland?" I said that I didn't know, to which he replied: "You should, she really loves you."

Lately, this question of what it means to stay somewhere; what it means to cultivate and sustain a community, has been central in my mind. My life up until now has been defined by, when given the option, always choosing to go rather than to stay. Case in point - I am writing this from Charlottenburg; a neighborhood in the old West Berlin. This has been my home since 30 October 2019 and will remain so until 18 December. I am in Berlin conducting anthropological fieldwork to better understand the role of archives and memorials documenting processes of incarceration play in societies affected by conflict. Particularly, I am interested in the understanding these memory spaces can bring to democratisation processes and the involvement of ex-prisoners themselves in these spaces. This time in Berlin also fulfills the next step in the pattern of wandering that has consumed my twenties.

Anthropological fieldwork always appealed to me because it allows life to have a methodology for understanding. It's a discipline based - fundamentally - in trying to understand humanity and understanding our own humanity through the lives of others. This methodical attempt to understand my own life, and how it fits into the lives of others, has framed my entire life. I've always been a compulsive note-

taker—writing in journals, jotting thoughts or observations down in my phone. I still write long letters to old friends, sometimes long emails. Because of this I have an entire archive of the self in old notebooks, files on old laptops, flash drives. For a time, this method of cataloguing also included taking photographs. It was important to me that these photographs capture, as closely as possible, what I was seeing in the space of a moment. Thus, I avoided anything staged. For a while, I even took photos while sitting on park benches just of whatever was in front of me at the time.

While cleaning out a closet during a recent trip to my parents' house, I began leafing through a stack of notebooks I've kept over the years. Some notebooks are meticulously organised, date, time, and place noted at the top of each entry. Others are pure, unadulterated chaos. In these chaotic records I can't even decide which way of the notebook is up, starting through one entry only to, a few pages later, have to turn the notebook upside down (I suppose upside down is a matter of perspective—perhaps a point I was trying to capture, although I doubt it). I sometimes wonder if I became an anthropologist to give meaning to these notes, to understand why I felt the need to capture everything and to, perhaps, generate some sort of method out of this madness. For me, this archiving was always an effort to understand the world around me and my place in it. I wanted to understand my context and wanted to learn how to be an assertive woman independently, in whatever context I might find myself.

Before heading to Berlin, I designed a methodological plan for my fieldwork. As part of this, I read books on collaborative ethnography, books on qualitative interviews, the semi-structured and dialogue interview methods, and I built a plan for talking to strangers. Through this, I was confronted with an unmistakable and, for me, an uncomfortable truth: writing an ethical, robust, and nuanced piece of ethnographic writing was contingent on learning to build community. Distancing itself from its problematic colonial origins, the new anthropology meant learning and understanding what it means to be human in collaboration with one another.



Fig.1 Berlin, 2019.

This was an uncomfortable truth for me because, for all my adult life, I've focused solely on how to be independent and alone. I thought that, as a woman, this single-ness was a righteous assertion of my right to carve a space out for myself. I'm proud that I've learned to do that well, and I'm proud that I know how to be alone.

Sometimes, because of the wandering, I've felt like snapshots in peoples' lives, rather than an integral part. In meditating on sustainability for this piece, it occurred to me that perhaps as a society we've become too comfortable with the discarding of things and too uncomfortable with broken things. I think about this in my own life: my snapshot way of living, my willingness to discard everything (clothes, kitchenware, sometimes even meaningful connection) for the sake of just moving onto the next thing, the next 'maybe this will be the adventure I've been waiting for. The next 'maybe this is the place where I'll finally "figure it out".' My primary challenge to myself during this fieldwork, equally for personal development as it is for my PhD, has been to revel in the uncertainty it takes to commune with strangers and to transform strangers into meaningful aspects of one's life. I conduct my qualitative interviews as semi-structured conversations, leaving space to be present for the witnessing of someone else's life—to be open to what they want to share with me and what they deem important for me to know.

About a week after the Dublin 'Penelope' incident, I was on a ferry to Scotland reading Milan Kundera's *Ignorance*. This novel, centered around the lives of political refugees returning to Prague for the first time in 20 years, meditates on themes of homecoming and community. These meditations often come through analysis of *The Odyssey*, the story of Odysseus' return to Ithaca. Because of this, my experience with the man in the Dublin bar then became connected with Odysseus' wife, Penelope. This then took my train of thought to what is often referred to as 'The Penelope Section' in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the only section of the book from a woman's perspective. I wondered then, which Penelope was I? Who had I lost? Who was I waiting for? Rather than answering these questions in my practiced sustained solitude, I hope this fieldwork teaches me meaningful lessons in building community and exploring what it means to collaborate on the project of being human.

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